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ABSTRACT

The National Literacy and the National Numeracy Strategies (NLNS) are part of the British government's major education reform initiative, an attempt to significantly raise standards of achievement in schools. This report is a summary of the first annual report from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) external evaluation of NLNS in England. This evaluation focuses on the implementation and the impact of the NLNS, with three key areas: obstacles or barriers to implementation; successes and weaknesses; and the emerging infrastructure, addressed from the perspective of four levels of the education system: national, local education authorities (LEA), school and classroom. This work supplements the evaluation being carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) whose focus is the impact of the two strategies on the teaching and learning of English and mathematics in the primary phase. (PM)

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Summary: First Annual Report

Watching & Learning

OISE/UT Evaluation of the Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies

Lorna Earl, Michael Fullan, Ken Leithwood, Nancy Watson
with Doris Jantzi, Ben Levin, Nancy Torrance

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Evaluation for Change: The OISE/UT Team as "Critical Friends"

Large-scale educational reform is difficult to do well. Government mandates and promising innovations rarely move beyond a few schools or classrooms (Elmore, 1996) in a form that improves teaching and learning. Fullan (2000) contends that the current wave of reform, the most ambitious since the 1960s, has arisen, in part, because educational change initiatives have a poor record of success. Putting ideas into practice is clearly a more complex process than was expected, especially since the goal is not only to establish large-scale reform, but, more importantly, to *sustain* it.

The National Literacy and the National Numeracy Strategies (NLNS) are part of the British government's major education reform initiative, an attempt to significantly raise standards of achievement in schools.

This report is a summary of the first annual report from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) external evaluation team who are sitting in "front row seats" watching and learning from the implementation of NLNS in England. Our role as "critical friends" is to describe NLNS from different perspectives, draw connections between the Strategies and the international research literature on large-scale reform, and identify issues for attention. During 1999 the OISE/UT team became familiar with the background and rationale of the Strategies, made contact with many of the key people and agencies, developed an understanding of how the Strategies are being implemented in England, and reviewed pertinent literature. We interviewed approximately 200 people, observed over 20 meetings and conferences, visited 20 schools and/or LEAs, reviewed documents and reports, and conducted extensive reviews of the international research literature on large-scale education reform. These reviews (published separately) provided a framework for considering NLNS. One of the reviews, by Fullan (2000), looked at policy levers at the macro level, and examined the history of large-scale reform and its return as a major force in the past decade. He identifies features of the current wave of reforms world wide, especially those that appear to be making a difference.

The second review, by Leithwood, Jantzi and Mascall (2000), focused on the micro- or school-level conditions that account for successful implementation of altered practices in schools and classrooms. Taken together, these reviews provide a comprehensive overview of the state-of-the-art knowledge about successful large-scale reform, recognising the contributions and roles of both central mandates and local action.

The Evaluation Framework

The OISE/UT team developed a framework for its work by mapping backwards from what NLNS aim to accomplish – *improvements in pupils' literacy and numeracy*. For such improvements to occur, pupils must come into contact with more powerful learning experiences in their schools, classrooms and homes. Our assumption is that altered practices produce these powerful learning experiences and thus lead to changes in the literacy and numeracy performance of pupils. NLNS are *policy levers* for altered practices to occur. All of this activity is occurring within England's unique *cultural, political, economic and educational context*.

Our two conceptual lenses, NLNS as policy levers for large-scale reform and NLNS as mechanisms to improve teaching and learning, allow us to see the Strategies not only as a national "scaling up" of reform initiatives, but also as practices implemented at the local level, in classrooms, schools and LEAs. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the evaluation framework.

When we look at NLNS as policy levers for large-scale reform, the reference points are features of other reform initiatives that are underway in many countries and are part of the UK effort as well:

- A vision for the education of pupils;
- Standards for judging performance;
- Curriculum frameworks and other instructional resources;
- Focus on teaching and learning;
- Coherent and integrated policies; and
- Accountability and incentives based on performance.

The second lens on NLNS aims to explain variation in the success of efforts to improve the core technology of schooling - teaching and learning. The literature suggests that these variations can be explained, broadly, in terms of their influence on:

- Motivations of educators to improve their practices or adopt new ones;
- Capacities (knowledge and skills) to carry out the improvements; and
- Situations conducive to developing and sustaining motivation and capacity for productive change.

There is another important dimension to educational change, in addition to the ideas included in the framework - timelines. How long does it take for sustainable change? How much progress can be made in five years with the whole nation as the focus of reform?

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Figure 1: The Framework Guiding the External Evaluation

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Reflections After Year One (1999)

About the Context

England during the 1990s was ripe for educational reform. Although the country was engulfed in educational change, public confidence in institutions had eroded and there was a sense of urgency about the need for reform. The Conservative government had increased accountability by establishing the National Curriculum and the National Assessment scheme and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED). When the Labour Party won the election in 1997 education was identified as the number one priority, with particular attention to the entitlement of those living in disadvantage. Prime Minister Blair described the situation from the government's perspective: *We have been good at educating an elite at the top but.. the imperative to raise standards for the many in line has been neglected.* This focus appears to have been widely accepted and endorsed by both the public and teachers. In particular, we heard many comments about the necessity to pay attention to high quality early instruction in English and mathematics.

About NLNS as Policy Levers for Large-Scale Reform

In comparison with other efforts at large-scale reform across developed nations, at this time, NLNS is among the most comprehensive and fully developed. Enhancing literacy and numeracy is a clear vision for education in England. The National Curriculum and NLNS Frameworks give a clear and well-developed picture of desired pupil learning, with high quality materials and resources to support them. There are explicit performance standards for pupils and schools, and performance data are used to provide assistance and support to schools and LEAs that are not meeting the targets.

The explicit focus on changing teaching practices linked to student learning is an important feature of NLNS. 1999 saw a massive commitment to the infrastructure, training and capacity-building to support teacher development and strategy implementation. Professionally produced packs of materials provide both structure and content for training and for subsequent implementation.

Significant new financial resources have supported NLNS. In addition, the Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) has worked with other agencies to align the Strategies and other policies. The revision of the National Curriculum brought the English and mathematics requirements into line with the Strategies, while the program for Initial Teacher Training is being similarly modified.

NLNS are impressive reform levers that have considerable potential to establish an infrastructure for lasting change. Both support and pressure are embedded in the implementation plan with a persistent focus on changing practices in schools and classrooms. There are, however, some areas that deserve attention as the Strategies unfold.

Particularly in the early part of our inquiry, we heard some concerns about lack of flexibility in some areas of NLNS; these concerns have lessened over time as LEAs and schools have deepened their understanding

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of the Strategies. Nonetheless, countering perceptions of lack of flexibility will remain an ongoing challenge. Providing too much flexibility always carries the risk of a return to past practices. Achieving and maintaining a workable balance requires that teachers understand how individual pupil differences can be accommodated *within* NLNS.

The apparently general acceptance of the Strategies at this time offers a solid foundation for moving to the next stage of implementation and for embedding the Strategies into local practice in LEAs and schools. While the image of schools and LEAs dedicated to literacy and numeracy is clear, what is less so is the image of them as organisations with the capacities to sustain the reform effort. The challenge is to embed NLNS in schools and LEAs that have developed the ownership, capacity, and other characteristics that allow them to evolve as needs and conditions change. While there is some talk about schools as "learning organisations," little has been done yet to clarify what that means and to help schools develop accordingly.

Clear targets provide teachers, headteachers and advisors with reference points for their own planning. At the same time, the emphasis on Key Stage assessments and target setting creates a potential risk that scores from a single assessment, invested with more significance than they may warrant, will overshadow the hard thinking that should enter into decisions about policy and practice. LEAs and schools need to develop "assessment literacy" so that they can interpret and use performance data wisely.

About NLNS as Mechanisms for Improving Teaching and Learning

NLNS are intended to bring about altered practices in schools and classrooms that will result in improved learning for pupils. To do this, the Strategies must influence people's motivation and capacity, as well as the situation in which they work.

NLNS include policies and implementation initiatives aimed at fostering motivation (e.g., target setting, public statements by politicians, and funding for improving literacy and numeracy). But motivation is influenced by more than external actions. Teachers' motivation is a function of their goals, their beliefs about their own capacities, and their beliefs about the extent to which they will be supported in their schools. In this first year, there has been strong support for developing the capacity of teachers and consultants to teach English and mathematics differently in primary schools. Teachers and headteachers in the schools that we have visited have been positive about NLNS and there seems to be high motivation to focus on literacy and numeracy. Maintaining motivation through the next phase will be particularly important. Learning and using new teaching skills is difficult. To stay the course, teachers need to believe that making this effort is worthwhile and that NLNS will continue to be supported as high priorities.

The resources and training that are part of NLNS are designed to give teachers and others the knowledge and skills they need to provide high quality instruction for literacy and numeracy to all children. The initial approach to developing such capacity relied heavily on a "cascade" model, with Regional Directors providing training to LEA staff, who then

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provided training to school leaders, who in turn assisted teachers in their schools. But NLNS leaders quickly realised the limitations of this approach; a cascade model alone could not provide the resources or the in-depth learning needed to transform instructional capacity. This is especially true with the broad scope of NLNS, covering over twenty thousand schools across the country. Many teachers in these schools need more content knowledge, as well as opportunities to acquire those classroom practices advocated by the Strategies.

The evolution of the Strategies has been accompanied by considerable expansion in the range of ways in which teachers can increase their knowledge and establish new skills. Perhaps the most interesting is the development (both formal and informal) of networks and clusters of teachers working together in local regions to discuss and share their perspectives and practices. Building the capacity of teachers, on a large scale, to provide programmes that result in greater competence in literacy and numeracy will likely require professional development and supervision for many years to come, as teachers continue to refine the necessary skills and understandings.

Finally, sustainable reform requires supportive working situations with a strong infrastructure for implementation that is flexible enough for adjustments to fit with local needs and priorities. Many national and LEA initiatives have been designed to enhance the situations, contexts, or settings in which NLNS are to be implemented. The national infrastructure encourages communication in both directions to provide support and to adapt NLNS to school and LEA suggestions for modifications in training and implementation. NLNS teams are each headed by a National Director, supported by a Co-ordinating Director and Regional Directors providing training and support to the LEAs in the regions. Over 300 literacy consultants and more than 320 numeracy consultants have been appointed in LEAs, with half the cost of their salaries borne by SEU. For such a large reform initiative, NLNS has been remarkably responsive to feedback from the field.

Creating and supporting schools and LEAs as workplaces that are congenial to NLNS is likely to be a major focus of the next stage in implementing the Strategies. Large-scale reform initiatives ignore local administrators and governors at their peril. LEA administrators are very useful partners in supporting school-level reform, while their indifference can be a major obstacle to developing school-level support. In the long term, they will have a significant influence on institutionalising NLNS. The infrastructure for long-term sustainability also needs to include continuous conversation with the general public and engagement with teacher training institutions and higher education. These conversations could clarify the nature and intent of the Strategies and provide feedback to continue the cycle of adjustment and response.

About Altered Practices

Across both NLS and NNS our evidence suggests that considerable attention is being paid to the kinds of classroom practices that are consistent with current views of learning English and mathematics. Although the "best" approach to early teaching of English and mathematics is still controversial, we conclude that NLNS stand as good a chance of improving pupils' literacy and numeracy as any other set of policies and practices implemented on a large scale. It is too soon to tell the extent to which these practices are being integrated into the routine work of schools and the feasibility of doing so.

About Improvement in Pupils' Literacy and Numeracy

The evidence to date seems to indicate modest but significant gains being made in literacy and numeracy across the country. It is early days in the implementation of NLNS and it would be naïve to conclude that the instructional and other practices included in NLNS were the sole causes of the gains. In our view, a large proportion of achievement gains to date may well be the result of increased motivation, with teachers spending more focused time on literacy and numeracy and concentrating their existing capacities on improvement in these areas. Efforts to make further gains are likely to bump up against the limits of these existing capacities. Continued achievement gains will depend on teachers learning new skills – a slow and incremental process. If this is true, it makes sense to focus a very high proportion of future NLNS effort on capacity development for teachers and on increasing the collective capacity of LEAs and schools, so that over the long run they will generate their own learning and continuous improvement.

About Timelines

When the current government took office in 1997, the targets for literacy and numeracy achievement were set for 2002, 5 years later. Fullan (2000) suggests that it is possible to improve an elementary school in 2 to 3 years, a secondary school in 5 to 6 years and a school district in 6 to 8 years (depending on size). How long it takes to improve schools in an entire nation or state is not known because change has never been accomplished on that scale before. While there is some evidence that the rates of change can be accelerated with the intensive use of change knowledge (Earl & Lee, 1998; Gray, 1999), it remains to be seen how much these rates can be accelerated. NLNS is working toward challenging objectives, but with many supportive conditions.

Conclusions and Challenges

As an instance of large-scale reform, NLNS compares very favourably with other such efforts anywhere. But it also faces some serious challenges. We offer what we believe are key strengths of the Strategies as well as potential challenges as fuel for discussion and debate in the next phase of planning and implementation.

Strengths of NLNS

NLNS is forging new ground in large-scale reform and thus making a significant contribution to the international knowledge base. In our view, the areas in which NLNS design and implementation to date have been particularly strong are leadership, policy alignment/coherence, support and pressure, communication, resources, and responsiveness and adaptability.

Leadership

A remarkably strong group of senior leaders has come together to develop and orchestrate NLNS. The Head of SEU and the National Directors of the two Strategies bring sets of skill and expertise that complement each other well as they provide conceptual and organisational leadership to the initiative. These leaders also have high credibility among educators. The Regional Directors continue this pattern, advising and supporting LEAs and a variety of other educational agencies with commitment and skill.

Policy Alignment/Coherence

To an extent that has rarely been achieved in other jurisdictions, other education policies have been aligned with NLNS – the National Assessments, the National Curriculum, OFSTED inspection guidelines, the initial teacher-training curriculum and the operation of funding formulas. That NLNS are a coherent and well-integrated set of practices and programmes is a considerable accomplishment. The coherence is not yet being experienced by all those in LEAs and schools, but the central alignment of policies, resources and actions is very clear.

Support and Pressure

The implementation of NLNS can be seen as a tapestry, with support as warp and pressure as weft. Sources of support include training, resources and consultants, while sources of pressure include target setting, funding constraints and OFSTED inspections. This complex tapestry is woven together in ways that have the potential for "deep" change to occur.

Communication

Communication is a daunting challenge in all large and complex reform initiatives, particularly one that involves so many diverse participants across a range of organisations. In NLNS, communication has been constant, with senior staff committed to both personal and public communication, clarifying misunderstandings and trying to reinforce consistent messages. Although miscommunications will continue to occur, these are usually addressed promptly.

Resources

Unlike many large-scale reform efforts, NLNS have been adequately funded, with funds tied to specific implementation initiatives. High quality curriculum and teaching resources have not only made implementation easier, they have also helped clarify the nature of the practices being advocated by the Strategies.

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Although the need for financial resources and training will continue for some time, the nature of such support will shift as headteachers and teachers gain confidence and competence with new practices.

Responsiveness and Adaptability
NLNS have been remarkably adaptable, especially given their magnitude. The SEU has paid close attention to feedback from the field and made adjustments based on the response from teachers and headteachers. The Regional Directors routinely "test the water" in schools and LEAs and incorporate changes into their plans.

Challenges

Given the magnitude and complexity of NLNS, there will always be challenges in implementation. In the first year of our evaluation, we have identified several areas that are likely to require consideration as the Strategies unfold.

Changing Practices is Hard Work – Intellectually and Emotionally
Making the changes required to fully implement NLNS has been and will continue to be hard work for teachers, heads and LEA personnel. They are likely to experience frustration and to tire along the way. DfEE has paid attention to recognising the efforts and successes of teachers, in particular, the national teaching awards and the congratulations from the government and DfEE on the Key Stage 2 results. These efforts will be even more important in the next few years as the Strategies become more established parts of educational practice rather than the exciting new initiatives that they are now.

Motivation is Important, But it is Not Enough in the Long Run
NLNS are complex and robust initiatives with the potential to increase levels of literacy and numeracy in English schools. However, the recent improvements in pupil performance in Key Stage assessments are likely due to an increased sense of urgency and motivation to focus on language and mathematics on the part of teachers and headteachers. These early gains have powerful reinforcement value to keep motivation high in the short term. As the change process continues, however, the demands on schools and teachers will evolve considerably. For example, sustaining implementation of both NLS and NNS will require extensive capacity-building in directions not yet anticipated, in addition to a continued commitment on the part of headteachers and teachers. Sustaining the improvements in pupil learning will require continued attention to professional development activities, high quality resources and opportunities for teachers to practise, in order to ensure that the teaching force has the knowledge and the skills to make the best use of NLNS resources within their unique school settings.

New Teachers are a Long Term Investment
England, like other countries, will have an influx of new teachers to the profession in the next decade. Because these new teachers will have the long-term responsibility for sustaining the work of NLNS, fostering their learning and supporting their confidence will pay dividends over time. New teachers need to have had a strong foundation in the content of language development and mathematics learning and in effective pedagogy. Although the relationships with teacher training institutions were somewhat sparse and somewhat superficial in the early

phases of NLNS, the appointment of six Regional Directors with specific responsibility for initial teacher training is a welcome development that should change this situation. Links and connections between the Strategies and initial teacher training will become stronger as these Regional Directors, in collaboration with the Teacher Training Agency, develop strong relationships and build coherence. In addition, NLNS might promote and even offer training programmes for newly qualified teachers to further increase their confidence and competence in teaching literacy and numeracy. Early-career teachers should be at the core of activities designed to build a strong culture of optimism and continuous improvement.

Assessment Literacy for Wise Decisions

It is no easy task to find ways to characterise or describe the impact of educational reforms. Numbers do provide a useful shorthand way of describing, communicating and measuring what is happening. The challenge is to ensure that educators and the public understand both the possibilities and limitations of such information. Educators and the public need to develop "assessment literacy" in order to examine student work and performance data, make critical sense of it, and to use these understandings to alter instruction and other aspects of the school to improve student learning. This process is already beginning in a number of LEAs. Assessment literacy not only serves an accountability purpose, but also becomes a major professional development and school improvement strategy. The end result is a sophisticated and powerful contribution to large-scale reform goals. As teachers and schools get used to working with more data, they become less susceptible to naïve conclusions based on numbers and more likely to use sound data as a basis for improvement planning.

The Power of Professional Learning Communities

NLNS are unlikely to be sustained in the long run unless teachers, headteachers and LEA personnel feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the goals that they represent. As the Strategies move beyond the initial awareness and implementation challenges, it will not be sufficient to have high quality training and strong support from headteachers. In addition, it will be essential to create strong professional learning communities at the school level. Teachers' individual knowledge and skills must be put to use, not only in individual classrooms, but also across the school as a whole. A strong professional learning community includes clear shared goals for pupil learning, collaboration and collective responsibility among teachers, reflective professional inquiry and opportunities for staff members to influence the school's activities and policies (King & Newmann, 2000). As well, sustaining NLNS will require that teachers and headteachers feel that their programmes (and new initiatives they are asked to take on) fit together into a coherent whole. Perceptions of a stream of unrelated initiatives will not support the kind of sustained, collective, problem-solving that is needed for continued success.

Dissenting Voices Contribute to Clear Thinking

NLNS are bold and multifaceted initiatives that are evolving over time. Throughout the early implementation, SEU has been open to feedback from the field and maintained a delicate balance between preserving the integrity of the Strategies and adapting them for local conditions. As people in the LEAs

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and schools become more familiar and comfortable with NLNS, maintaining this balance will be more complicated. There will be many opinions about the "best way" to proceed. SEU needs to avoid succumbing to false certainty and inappropriately rigid adherence to the Strategies, while at the same time ensuring that the core principles within them are not lost. Challenge and debate about ideas can help to clarify both intentions and approaches during the next few years. It would be wise for SEU to continue to be open to this kind of clarification by, as Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggest, *moving toward the danger* and forging collaborative relationships within the educational service and the wider community. This means establishing new partnerships and reinforcing old ones so that entire systems are the focus of change: schools, families, neighbourhoods and cities, in concert. In particular, higher education can play a powerful role in the kind of ongoing analysis and challenge that stimulate clear thinking in the effort to "get it right."

The OISE/UT team is finding this project both stimulating and thought-provoking. We look forward to embarking on the next stage and continuing our association.

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